

France Prešeren's Poems – From Misunderstanding to Teaching

ZORAN BOŽIČ

Abstract. An empirical study of understanding *The Baptism at the Savica* showed that Slovenian high school students had notable difficulties in decoding the basic meanings of Prešeren's poem. In literature, didactics offer three methods of facilitating reception of complex classical poetry: linguistic modernisation, addition of notes, and transmission into prose. Due to the cult status of Prešeren's poetry, modernizations can only be limited, while commenting hinders a spontaneous reading experience; as a result, only prosification entirely solves the problems of pronounced archaization, inverted word order and abundant metaphors in Prešeren's lines. This was confirmed by an empirical study in which high school students, who read the prosification together with the verses from *The Baptism at the Savica*, attested a comprehension which was twice as good as comprehension of students who only read the poetry.

Keywords: empirical research, reception, France Prešeren, *The Baptism at the Savica*, prosification

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12697/IL.2013.18.1.07>

Introduction

The paper deals with the problems of understanding demanding classical poetry represented in the main poetic texts of the Slovenian romantic poet France Prešeren.¹ Allegations of difficulties in understanding Prešeren's poems emerged already during his lifetime, while in 1859 the Slovenian poet, author

¹ France Prešeren (1800–1849) graduated in law in Vienna. He lived and worked in Ljubljana, and, due to his free thinking and Slovenian patriotism, was considered politically incorrect in the former Austria, and was admitted to the Bar only two years before his death. His best known poems are *Sonnets of Unhappiness*, *Wreath of Sonnets* and *The Baptism at the Savica*. He published a collection of his poems, entitled *Poems*, in 1847. The seventh stanza of his poem *A Toast* is the present Slovenian anthem. The highest award for artistic achievement is named after Prešeren and the date of his death is a national holiday.

and linguist Fran Levstik wrote the paper *Nekoliko težjih reči v Prešernu* (*Some more difficult spots in Prešeren*), where he provides a more detailed explanation of hard-to-understand passages in eighteen poems. Anton Slodnjak, editor of Levstik's collected works, corrects Levstik's understanding of Prešeren's poems at several points (Levstik 1956). Moreover, over the next hundred and fifty years, several instances clearly show that even experts on Prešeren, namely people who were professionally committed to explaining his poems, have had difficulties in understanding some passages in Prešeren's poetry (Božič 2010: 385–389). While the first empirical studies on the poetry of France Prešeren emerged in Slovenia only at the turn of the millennium, the western European literary scholarship approached classical poetry in this way as early as in the 1920s.

Ivor A. Richards, an English scholar, was one of the first to empirically research the reception of classical poetry. As co-author of the book *The Meaning of Meaning*, Richards² developed the idea that we should systematically distinguish between two completely different language uses, namely between scientific and emotional use: the former communicates thoughts about things, while the latter awakens emotions. The first use is subject to the question of reality, while the latter, particularly important for the poetry, is not related to this question. In his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Richards defines reader's experience as the only possible starting points to evaluate a textual work of art, distinguishing, during the process of experiencing a poem, among the following elements: visual sensing of words, images connected with the sensation, relatively free images, ideas on various subjects, emotions, voluntary relations (Grosman 1974: 13–16).

Based on this theory, Richards conceived his most influential book *Practical criticism*,³ which is memorable mainly due to its original empirical research

² Richards (1893–1979), an English literary critic, theorist and linguist became lecturer at the Cambridge University in 1922. He participated in the basic semantic treatise *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) together with his colleague Charles K. Ogden, with whom he co-created the Basic English language project. In 1924 he presented a new view on literary communication in his book *Principles of Literary Criticism*, while fifteen years after his book *Practical Criticism* had been published, he became professor at Harvard University.

³ *Practical Criticism* is even nowadays a valid technique of close reading and interpretation of poetry. On the website of the Faculty of English Philology, Cambridge University (<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/vclass/pracrit.htm>), the interpretation of the poems by Thomas Wyatt was presented in the following steps: The Poem – First Impressions – Developing Your Thoughts – Critical Discussion – The Answers? – Sir Thomas Wyatt – Conclusions. Unlike other methods, this begins with the students analysing poems on the basis of directional questions and later comparing their observations with the traditional interpretation, and finally familiarizing themselves with the poet's life and work.

rather than its theory. Grosman namely warns that “in the end, Richards’ final acceptance of completely subjective reader’s experience makes each attempt at criticism – and also his own extensive essays – utterly futile, therefore many Richards’ critics point out that his work *Practical Criticism*, instead of practically demonstrating the functioning of his theory, only reveals its complete uselessness” (ib. 18). The novelty and value of *Practical Criticism* lies in the empirical research, which for the first time explained how complex comprehension, experiencing and evaluation of poetry are and how they oppose regular conceptions. In the Introduction, Richards refers to three major objectives of creating his book: to present a new, documented approach to the research of modern culture, to introduce new criteria for studies of comprehending and experiencing poetry, and to prepare grounds for more efficient teaching of literary reading (Richards 1929: 3).⁴

Further he describes the research he conducted over several years among his students⁵ at Cambridge, i.e. among intelligent and relatively well-read readers (who included roughly equal shares of males and females). Students would receive sheets of paper with printed poems with the name of the author omitted and would have to freely interpret and comment these poems. Students had one week to deliver their comments,⁶ where they had to mark the number of precise readings of each particular poem.⁷ Richards observed improper reception of poems at two levels, i.e. at the level of meaning (statements) and at the level of feelings (expressions), so he primarily researched comprehension and experiencing. At the end of the Introduction he gives a systematic description of ten problems in interpreting poems, ranging from failure to making out “the prose sense”, difficulties with metaphorical expressions, stock responses,

⁴ Considering the entirety of his theoretical and practical approach towards literature, Richards’ work is often compared with the contemporary research of Russian formalists who are, according to Hladnik, “pioneers of the new discipline of literary science” (1995: 325). In addition I would like to point out an interesting problem of cultural history: at the same time when literary science as a science of the fictive world, including Richards’ writing, started to use verifiable scientific methods, the real world has begun, with the release of Edward Bernays’ book *Propaganda*, its approach to the virtual world.

⁵ The vast majority of them were graduate students of the English language.

⁶ Richards points out that in order to obtain valid results, he guaranteed full anonymity of participants, however slightly less than half of the students wrote and handed over their interpretations.

⁷ Since the number of readings was never less than four, and some of the students read a particular poem up to ten times, Richards establishes that they put a lot of effort and energy into analyzing the poems.

sentimentality, and doctrinal adhesion to preconceptions, connected with general evaluations of literary criticism.

In the second, most extensive part of the book (Documentation), Richards documents, by citing his students' comments, improper receptions of thirteen poems, designated with abbreviations from I to P XIII. To illustrate I cite one of the student's opinions of a sonnet written by the notable English poet John Donne (*Holy Sonnets VII*): "I confess immediately that I can't make out what all the shouting is about. The poem is completely confusing. The numerous pronouns and adverbs mix up the thought, if indeed there is one definite thought throughout." (Ib. 43–44) Thus Richards made his point when he stated that the reception of classical poetry is an extremely demanding task.

Slovenian secondary school students encounter problems in understanding Prešeren's *The Baptism at the Savica* that are similar to those encountered by graduate students of Richards in understanding classical English poetry. *The Baptism* is a romantic poem, consisting of three parts: a sonnet dedicated to Matija Čop,⁸ the Introduction, written in tercets, and the Baptism, composed in stanzas. In the Introduction, Prešeren presents Slovenian resistance to Bavarian Christianisation efforts. Valjhun, the Christian army leader, defeats the Slovenian prince Črtomir and kills all his soldiers. This leads to Slovenians losing the national independence for a thousand years. In *The Baptism*, the defeated Črtomir hopes to make his life meaningful with Bogomila, his fiancée and pagan priestess at the Bled island (the first retrospective depicts their happy meetings). However, during the fights, Bogomila has converted to Christianity (the second retrospective) and aims to enter a monastery. Consequently, Črtomir must renounce her. At the end of the poem, Črtomir is baptised by the Savica waterfall, expecting to go to Aquileia, a centre of Christianity, and becoming a monk.

Problems with comprehending *The Baptism at the Savica*

After the decision was adopted to research the problems of receiving *The Baptism at the Savica* more in detail at the scientific level, modern findings about reading processes or literary reading, such as those presented at the turn of the millennium in monographs by Sonja Pečjak, Boža Krakar Vogel and Meta

⁸ Matija Čop (1797–1835) was Prešeren's friend and mentor. He spoke more than ten foreign languages and was well-read in antique, Renaissance as well as contemporary romantic poetry. Under his influence, Prešeren began using Romance poetic forms. After a stay in Lvov and Rijeka, Čop became a librarian in Ljubljana. He died after drowning in the Sava river.

Grosman (Pečjak 1999, Krakar Vogel 2004 and Grosman 2004), were used as the theoretical basis of our empirical research.⁹ For lengthy narrative texts which are not presented merely with the selected fragment,¹⁰ modern literature didactics foresees two possible school treatments:

- a) Home reading, i.e. “students independently read literary works outside school”, which is usually followed by two hours of discussion at school, and
- b) Long reading, i.e. reading which “takes place at school so that students, together with their teacher, read and interpret a particular literary work over a longer period” (Krakar Vogel 2004: 108–109). Due to the fact that the method of long reading requires more school time, students as a rule read *The Baptism* at home.

To the greatest possible degree, home reading should be a spontaneous and burden-free activity, as when we “give [students] explanations of the text and impose [on them] the task of finding answers to these questions, the possibility for them to achieve pleasurable and/or interesting literary experiences diminishes considerably” (Grosman 2004: 192).¹¹ In the chapter entitled *Književne sposobnosti* (Literary abilities), Krakar gives a detailed analysis of the literary reading ability, which consists of four cognitive-receptive phases: experiencing, comprehending, evaluating and expressing to prove reading ability (Krakar Vogel 2004: 40–45). Experiencing, which the author associates with the first reading of a text, is the phase where “the reader spontaneously perceives, feels, visualizes, and understands meaningful or obvious components of the text, and disregards those which do not match his/her scheme and often [...] expresses his/her first opinion of approval or rejection”. Krakar is certainly aware that in actual reading, these cognitive-receptive phases are intertwined, that consequently experiencing a text depends on the reading comprehension,¹² i.e.

⁹ These authors are scientists and professors of Psychology, Slovenian language and literature and German language and literature Departments at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

¹⁰ *Krst pri Savici* has been defined as compulsory home reading in accordance with the valid Curriculum for the Slovenian language as a subject in high schools (1998) (p. 31).

¹¹ In her dissertations, Grosman explicitly stresses the importance of a positive literary experience, which is in her opinion a key factor of discussing literature at school, as well as of the development of students’ reading competences.

¹² “As the reader was unable to understand the text well, he could respond only in a superficial and naive way, illustrating that the initial two phases of reading classical verses with demanding wording and composition are not automatically followed by comprehension.” (Krakar Vogel 2000/2001: 131)

on word decoding, access to the words and on analysis of the meaning and syntax (Pečjak 1999: 41–47).

Difficulties with the reception of Prešeren's poetry were presented by Boža Krakar Vogel in her 2001 article *Obravnavanje literarne klasike v sodobni šoli – na primeru Prešerna* (*Dealing with literary classicism in modern school – the example of Prešeren*), who in her empirical research tested comprehension of one stanza of Prešeren's *A Wreath of Sonnets*, while I decided to empirically test the comprehension of Prešeren's romantic poem *The Baptism at the Savica*, since opinions on its difficult receptivity appeared while the poet was still alive¹³ (Prešeren 1964: 339).

I therefore tested comprehension of three passages in the first six stanzas of *The Baptism* (from the stanza "The matching violence of man and cloud" to the stanza "When Črtomir was here, on this small isle"; Prešeren 1999: 119–121) of students in the first two grades of high school who had to reiterate the contents or the message of the first half of the first, third and fourth stanza in their own words.

This allowed me to verify the third, highest level of comprehension, the so-called applied comprehension, which manifests through students' ability to transform the text they have read from one abstract form into another, to explain particular metaphors and symbols by rewording them and to analyse the components/events in a text and define their mutual relationships (Pečjak 1993: 59). This naturally implied primarily testing reference meanings of the text, i.e. facts which cannot depend on the reader's expectations or his cognitive scheme. To illustrate: in the first octave of *The Baptism*, the night fight and storm, the dawn shining on Triglav and the calm surface of the Bohinj lake are illustrated, while at the aesthetic or symbolic level the contrast *temna noč – svetla zarja zlati z rumen'mi žarki* (*dark night – bright dawn gilds with yellow rays*) presents a point of view which belongs to the area of co-referential meanings (Pečjak 1999: 48).¹⁴

The degree of comprehension in a particular task was graded with two points (complete answer), one point (partial answer) and zero points (wrong

¹³ Prešeren's letter to Stanko Vraz written in 1837: "As you wished, I am sending you 24 copies of my *Kerst* which you found to be so difficult to understand."

¹⁴ Without that, scientific examination of comprehension would be absolutely impossible. Thus it is wise to share the opinion of Meta Grosman who stated that the author's "choice and arrangement in the artistic structure is obligatory for a reader" and that "most reading 'mistakes' and consequently limited or groundless actualizations of literary text arise from the reader's inability to perceive or his wrong perception of the text constituents." (Grosman 2004: 156, 172).

or no answer). In each fragment it was thus possible to achieve 100 points altogether or a maximum 300 points in all three. The results for each fragment and for the entire questionnaire are given below:

Fragment	Total points	Points achieved	Percentage
Mož in oblakov vojsko je obojno ...	100	18	18
Na tleh leže slovenstva stebri stari ...	100	12	12
Prenesla pričujoče ure teže ...	100	22	22
TOTAL	300	52	17

The final result (17 percent of available points) testifies that high school students experience, in an overwhelming majority, unsurpassable difficulties with their first, spontaneous reading of *The Baptism at the Savica*, since they do not understand the text and are consequently not able to experience it. Such students undoubtedly need help with their first reading.

As I selected fragments for testing without using a special key and primarily with the intention to create a meaningful unit, I was surprised by a great difference in understanding the first and the fourth stanza as opposed to the third. Detailed observation shows that all three stanzas are profusely inverted and noticeably metaphorical, yet there is a significant difference in the number of archaic words. While the first stanza contains three such terms and the fourth only one, there are nine in the third. Obviously it is a question of a clear opposite correlation: the greater the number of archaisms, the more understanding deteriorates. This also confirms the view of Grosman, who noted that numerous unknown words make understanding a text completely impossible.

Concrete answers are even more explicit than sheer statistics. Since such research is rare and the results are exceptionally instructive, I relate examples of a complete answer, partial answer and complete failure to understand each stanza and I provide, for comparison, half of a particular octave, which served as the source text:

The first stanza	The third stanza	The fourth stanza
<i>mož in oblakov vojsko je obojno / končala temna noč, kar svetla zarja / zlati z rumen'mi žarki glavo tro- jno / snežnikov kranjskih siv'ga poglavarja.</i>	<i>Na tleh leže slovenstva ste- bri stari, / v domačih šegah utrjene postave; / v deželi parski Tesel gospodari, / ječe pod težkim jarmom sini Slave.</i>	<i>Prenesla pričujoče ure teže / bi ne bila let poznih glava siva; / v mladosti vendar trdnejše so mreže, / ki v njih drži nas upa moč golj' fiva.</i>
COMPREHENSION: The war and the storm finished when the dawn shone on the snow-cov- ered mount Triglav.	COMPREHENSION: Carinthia is destroyed; foreigners are masters of Slovenes who suffer under the siege.	COMPREHENSION: In distress the young fare better than the old, be- cause the young still hold some hope.
FAILURE TO COMPREHEND: In the dark night no trace of the army can be seen, while during daytime even one general can be seen.	FAILURE TO COMPREHEND: Although Slovenes were oppressed, they main- tained their culture and traditions without submitting to rulers.	FAILURE TO COMPREHEND: When old your head becomes gray and the brain no longer works well, but when young, you think well and know how to cheat.

As the examples of failed comprehension show, even though the majority of students decode many meanings of particular words or phrases, the real problem appears when these partial meanings have to be combined into a whole.¹⁵ We can conclude that *The Baptism at the Savica* will not be able to perform its expected role in home reading in this reading population if nothing is done to facilitate comprehension. The first reading is simply too exacting for students, and consequently further discussion at school (unless the teacher uses the method of “long reading”) can be but passive reception of the teacher’s explanation or a reproduction of “literature about literature”.

¹⁵ As most of the examples show, students – through miscomprehension of the stanzas which describe the situation after the night battle – take meaningful components from the introductory story and use them to construct a complete meaning: for example in the metaphorical phrase *na tleh leže slovenstva stebri stari* ‘old pillars of Slovenedom are cast down’, which symbolically describes the loss of Slovenian independence and state, students saw something very material like the dead bodies of young soldiers lying on the ground.

School possibilities to improve reception of *The Baptism at the Savica*

In the twentieth century, four different options/possibilities to improve the reception of older or linguistically/stylistically more demanding verse texts gained ground: linguistic actualization (modernization), adding notes (commenting), transmission into prose (prosification) and general simplification (simplification). Below I present the first three options in more detail in relation to *The Baptism at the Savica*, since simplification¹⁶ as a tool of didactic adjustment cannot be used in school.

Linguistic actualization (modernization)

In West European literary readers and also in independent publications we can find examples of linguistic actualizations (appearing side-by-side with the original, but also replacing the original) of mostly authors from the Middle Ages, who are, due to the language development, poorly comprehensible or generally incomprehensible for today's readers who speak Italian, French or English as their mother tongue. For example, in the beginning of *The Knight's Tale*¹⁷ by the English epic poet Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of the linguistic modernization has striven to keep the verse and rhyme while substituting ten archaic words or phrases with modern counterparts and in thirteen cases substituting an archaic word with its modern form. This means that 23 out of 67 words have been linguistically modernized, which is about 30 percent.

In modern editions of Prešeren's poems (all notable school editions of poems except *Zdravljica* (*The Toast*)¹⁸ originate from *Poezije* (1847), which was printed in the *gajica* alphabet) modernizations occur at the levels of

¹⁶ It implies heavily abridged editions of different classical texts, written in prose. For example, in Great Britain, such texts are edited by Longman (Longman Simplified English Series) for readers learning English as their second or foreign language. Simplified editions of classics are immensely popular and *Shakespeareove pripovedke* (*Tales from Shakespeare*) by Charles and Mary Lamb were reprinted eighteen times between the first Slovene edition of 1933 and 1971.

¹⁷ These 10 verses from the beginning of *The Knight's Tale* in Longman's simplified version, which saw five editions during the period 1987–1990, run as follows: "Duke Theseus once ruled over Athens. He was a great soldier. He conquered Scythia in a war, and married its Queen Hippolyta." (Chaucer 1990)

¹⁸ The poem *Zdravljica* (*A Toast*) was censored and first published only after the March revolution in 1848 in Bleiweis' newspaper *Novice* (News) and in the poetic almanac *Krajska čebelica V* (*The Carniolan Bee*), set in the *gajica* alphabet.

orthography, sounds and forms, while the vocabulary remains unchanged due to the cult status of Prešeren's poetic word. The possibilities for improved reception brought by linguistic modernization of Prešeren's poems are evident in the comparison between critical approach to the texts of *Poezije* in Prešeren's Collected Works (1965) by Kos and the more popular version of Slodnjak (1964), which was intended for a wider reading audience and of which an incredible 24,000 copies were printed in three reprints in a ten year period.¹⁹

To compare both editions I chose the first six octaves of *The Baptism at the Savica* and used them to test high school students' comprehension of the poem. In Kos' edition of *The Baptism* there are 73 difficult-to-understand words (they are no longer in use, or are archaic in form, accent or meaning), representing around 25 percent of all words, while Slodnjak's version still includes 64 archaic words, i.e. about 22 percent. Slodnjak's modernizations generally follow linguistic changes which are known as "new forms" in the history of Slovene literary language, which at about 1850 experienced a shift from distinctive Carniolan literary language towards all-Slovenian. Despite a clear intention to render Prešeren's language more familiar to a contemporary audience, Slodnjak's endeavours were very limited as he could not change abbreviated words or words with unusual accents on account of the metric scheme,²⁰ and he could not modernize numerous words with archaic endings because of their rhymes.

Considering the fact that even after linguistic modernization, one fifth of difficult-to-understand words remains, that modernization is ten times less extensive than in Chaucer and that empirical test in the first grade of high school where I used Slodnjak's version of *The Baptism* showed an extremely low degree of comprehension, I conclude that in Prešeren's case, this method of improving reception of a demanding classical text has a negligible positive impact.²¹

¹⁹ In the last four decades the following practice gained ground: secondary school readers include a more demanding version of Prešeren's poems edited by Kos, while elementary schools reprint a slightly updated version by Slodnjak.

²⁰ The word *mladenčev* (young men) could be updated as *mladenčev*, however he could not write the proper form *mladeničev*.

²¹ Chaucer wrote his texts more than four centuries before Prešeren, however the share of archaic words showed that there is no significant difference between the difficulty of reception of both authors. In addition, Prešeren's poetical language is more inverted and above all much more metaphorical.

Adding notes (commenting)

Adding footnotes or endnotes²² is common practice in difficult classical and modern texts regardless of literary form or type. Notes explain either less well-known data or receptively harder passages and undoubtedly facilitate comprehension of the text and thus also its experiencing. They may, however, be disturbing or even restraining as indirectly pointed out by Grosman (2006: 112), who notes – when explaining reception-related difficulties in reading more demanding texts – that various Slovenian textbooks “sometimes contain whole glossaries of new words with no respect of the fact that a text with so many new words becomes unintelligible to a student, de-motivates and diverts him/her from the subject”.²³

Since *The Baptism at the Savica* is, in terms of reception, one of the most demanding Slovene literary texts belonging to the hard core of Slovene literary standard, I first decided to research notes as they appear in similar (i.e. classical and in verse form) foreign literary texts. Thus *The Divine Comedy* in its 1971 edition and *The Tales from Canterbury* in its 1996 edition (in both cases these are one of numerous reprints, therefore these works are well-used) both include copious notes. On average there is one comment for each two lines in Dante, and exactly the same frequency appears in Chaucer’s General Prologue, which is semantically very condensed. According to these criteria the entire *Baptism at the Savica*, consisting of 516 lines, would be expected to have approximately 250 notes. As in one of the recent editions of Prešeren’s poems for school use (Prešeren 2000), edited by Boris Paternu, there are only 15 notes added to *The Baptism at the Savica* (two for the sonnet to Matija Čop, five for the *Introduction* and eight for *The Baptism*), so the following has to be stated: either the comparison to Dante and Chaucer is completely out of place or the editions of *The Baptism* for school use have essentially too few notes added.

In defining the necessary number of notes we can look to Karel Ozvald, who used his experience of teaching Prešeren’s *Nova pisarija* (*The New Writing*) and published it with as many as 69 exhaustive notes in *Naši kulturni delavci* (*Our Cultural Workers*). We can extrapolate that the whole *The Baptism at the Savica* would require 250 notes (verse ratio: 48 versus 516), which is, on

²² Modern readers more and more often have notes placed on the outer edge of the page.

²³ The fact that a large number of notes essentially reduce or even make impossible for the reader to spontaneously get familiar with a text (so-called evasion reading or reading with absorption) was indicated by the two authors of the simplified version of Shakespeare’s dramas, who stated that “readers who read the book in its original form must look into the dictionary too often, and in doing they forfeit a good deal of reading pleasure offered by the book” (Lamb 1971: 3).

average, one note to every two verses, thus presenting an equal density of clarifications as in the case of Dante or Chaucer. As such a number of notes actually disturbs the reading process and reduces the pleasure of reading and does not resolve the question of the 90% inversion rate in the lines of Prešeren's poem, we can reliably conclude that commentary cannot give a satisfactory solution to the problem of the first reading of *The Baptism at the Savica*.

Our thesis concerning the indispensable number of notes in the school version of *The Baptism at the Savica* would have remained an unconfirmed scientific hypothesis had I not discovered, during the finishing phase of the research when I scrutinized school readers, that by far the largest number of notes in Prešeren's poems can be traced to an ethnic Slovene reader, compiled in Italy by Robert Petaros and Maks Šah *Od prvih zapiskov do romantike* (*From the First Records to Romanticism* 1980).²⁴ Both authors added as many as 193 notes to the full *The Baptism at the Savica* (11 to the sonnet to *Matija Čop*, 51 to the *Introduction*, 131 to *The Baptism*),²⁵ which is an exceptional density of clarifications, amounting to one note each 2.7 verses. In the first six octaves of *The Baptism*, where I foresaw at least 25 notes, they found 24 difficult passages which needed to be explained to young readers.

Transmission into prose (prosification)

According to Gérard Genette, the author of the famous *Palimpsestes*, prosification is, together with translation, versification and trans-stylization, one of the cases of formal transposition (Genette 1982: 237–340), which “only likens the original to a new metasystem”, in our case to the requirements of the prose form of literary text (Juvan 1990: 133–134). Prosification as a reception aid is used in two ways: as a substitute for a receptively too demanding verse original or as didactic addition to improve comprehension of demanding classical poetry.

The first method emerges also within simplified versions of texts at some key passages. The prosification of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (Lamb 1971) is an example thereof: the adaptors of the text not only modernized the

²⁴ This could be expected, as the central Slovene readers succumb to the mythological image of Prešeren, who “does not need many notes”, however our ethnical minorities obviously have a less burdened and more distant view on necessity of notes, based on their school practice. This may also be a continuance of the tradition, which was established by Ozvald through his detailed notes a hundred years ago.

²⁵ This is thirteen times more than in Paternu's edition of Prešeren in 2000.

language, but also transformed verse to prose, and at the same time formally transposed the dramatic text to prose.

The second prosification method is intended for use at school and consists of displaying the same text in verse and prose, side-by-side. A typical example can be found in one of the recent editions of *The Divine Comedy* (Dante 1998), which presents short prose summaries of most of the text, while some of the most beautiful fragments are in both verse and prose. The parallel presentation shows formal transposition from verse to prose and is linked to linguistic modernization. A large number of added words can be noted as modern readers require more detailed explanations of Dante's extremely sparing expression.

A good example of prosification appears in *Četrto slovensko berilo* (*The Fourth Slovene Reader*), prepared during German occupation in 1943 by Kristina Hafner and Franc Ločniškar. In their note under the first stanza of the poem *Slovo od mladosti* (*Farewell to Youth*), where the poetic language is modernized to the maximum still accepted by Slovenes, the stanza was explained through prosification almost completely comparable to that of *The Divine Comedy* mentioned above. The poem *Farewell to Youth* is one of the receptively most difficult of Prešeren's poems. A detailed analysis of the original stanza shows that it contains many less comprehensible words,²⁶ and above all that almost all lines contain inverted word order or metaphors. Prosification of the stanza, as opposed to modernization and commentary with their limited possibilities to improve reception, solves, in the first reading, the problems of archaisms, inversion and metaphorical language, which are the three factors which mostly hinder proper comprehension of the text.²⁷ Since the prosification thoroughly performs the role of didactic modernization and simplification, the authors of the reader could, if they displayed both versions of the text side-by-side, leave the original in unaltered form on the left side, which would also allow more motivated students to obtain a realistic impression of Prešeren's poetic language.

²⁶ *lepši, kmalo, kmalo, minule, rož'ce, viharjov, jeze, rjule, vendèr, zdihuje, obvarji.*

²⁷ Naturally, one should be aware that prosification is a useful didactic tool particularly for teaching at the secondary school level. It can also be helpful at the university level if students themselves attempt to prosify demanding classical lyrics. Otherwise, close or long reading methods are preferred where the teacher reads together with students and they analyse archaic language and abstract metaphors as they go along. Only in this way can students fully adopt a higher level of reading competence.

Confirmed usefulness of prosification in improving reception of *The Baptism at the Savica*

In order to confirm my thesis that prosification is the most suitable didactic aid for improving the reception or primarily cognitive response of students also for complex Slovene classical verse texts, I carried out an empirical study in three classes of the first grade of Tolmin high school in February 2006. All three classes were taught by the same Slovene language teacher who carried out the test according to my instructions, while the classes were completely comparable as to the number of students, gender distribution, parents' education and students' general achievement in the final year of elementary school. I prepared three types of material: the first class received the first twelve octaves of *The Baptism* in poetic form, the second in prose form, while the third group received both versions side-by-side, with poetry on the left and prosification on the right.²⁸ The teacher first distributed the material to the students who silently read all twelve stanzas, which were printed on both sides of one sheet of paper.²⁹ When all students had carefully read the material, the teacher took

²⁸ The first stanza will serve as an example:

Poetry	Prose
Mož in oblakov vojsko je obojno ... končala temna noč, kar svetla zarja zlati z rumen'ni žarki glavo trojno snežnikov kranjskih sivga poglavarja. Bohinjsko jezero stoji pokojno, sledu ni več zunanjega viharja; al somov vojska pod vodo ne mine, in drugih roparjev v dnu globočine.*	Z nočjo sta se končala tako nevihta kot vojaški spopad, zdaj pa jutranja zarja obseva vse tri vrhove Triglava. Bohinjsko jezero je mirno, saj ni več sledov viharnege vremena; vendar se pod vodno gladino somi in druge roparske ribe še vedno spo- padajo.**

* The matching violence of man and cloud / By darkling night are ended now, and bright / Sunrise now gilds the threefold peaks unbowed / Of Carniola's grey and snowbound height. / All tranquil lie Lake Bohinj's water proud, / Of battle now no trace remains in sight. / But armies of fierce pike beneath the waves / Fight other denizens of th' watery caves. (Prešeren 1999: 119)

** With the end of the night, the storm and battle also ended. Now the morning sun gilds the three peaks of Triglav. The Bohinj lake is calm, signs of stormy weather can no longer be seen; yet under its undisturbed surface, sheatfish and other predatory fish still struggle with each other.

²⁹ The students with both literary forms were instructed by the teacher to read zig-zag so that they first read each stanza in its original form and after that its prosification. If necessary, they may go back to the original form and then continue with the second stanza.

it away and then handed out the same questionnaires in all three classes which included three tasks to verify student comprehension.

Due to the added prosification which already contains applied comprehension of the original, I chose, to test any potential differences between individual classes, only such tasks with which I identified the comprehension level for words and the comprehension level for interpretation,³⁰ while using the procedure of supplementing, summarizing and answering questions (statements), where I chose a closed-type task with several alternative answers (Pečjak 1993: 61–62). The results of the empirical test, expressed as a percentage of correct solutions, since otherwise the various numbers of possible points (1st task – 4, 2nd task – 2, 3rd task – 7) would make the task not completely comparable:

	Supple- menting	Summarizing	Choosing	TOTAL
I. CLASS (poetry)	3	57	32	27
II. CLASS (prose)	10	63	66	48
III. CLASS (both)	13	90	68	54

As expected, only a low percentage of students in all three classes successfully completed the first task, although the difference between the first and the third group is significant. The result of the second group is surprising since in the prosified version of the text, as many as three words out of four differ in form from the original. The second task has the highest average score of all, as discovering the plot is obviously less demanding than decoding textual details. The outstandingly high results of the third group can, in my opinion, be attributed to “zig-zag” reading which prolongs the perception of the text and allows increased memorization. The third task proves that *The Baptism at the Savica* in its first reading indeed provokes exceptional reception problems, as appropriate referential meanings of the text were identified by a mere third of high school students who only read the poetic form of the poem. As expected, comprehension improves two-fold in those who read *The Baptism* in prosified form as there was no reception interference from archaisms, inversion and

³⁰ These two levels refer to familiarity with terminology and specific data (the lowest level) and understanding of relations between each part of the text or singling out some mutually independent events, points of view and their relevant details (the second level) (Pečjak 1993: 57–58).

metaphors. Such a high result was also noted in the third group, who read *The Baptism* in both forms.

As in the first empirical study, it would be pointless to contend that no high school student from the first group reached the level of independent reading, that only one reached the level, enabled through teaching, and that all others remained at the frustration level of reading (Pečjak 1993: 64); rather, the results serve as repeated and clear proof that also educated people have great problems understanding *The Baptism at the Savica* and most other Prešeren's poem at the first reading.³¹ The results of the students from the third class show that the addition of the prosification immensely improves the reception, as these students, when their cognitive response was measured, achieved up to a hundred percent higher rate of positive answers compared to students from the first group.

An even clearer picture is obtained if we compare the results of only the last two tasks, since the first task mostly assesses memorization rather than comprehension. After this limitation, students of the first group obtained 45 percent of available points and students of the third group 79 percent. The percentage of the first group is almost identical to the result obtained by Krakar when assessing the cognitive response of primary and high school students (Krakar Vogel 2000/2001: 131), while the four fifths of points obtained by the third group confirm that prosification³² proves to be an efficient didactic aid for the first reading of *The Baptism at the Savica*. My hypothesis is that added prosification benefits all three types of readers according to Schmidt³³ – utilitarian readers (who, in my view, are the most frequent among high school students), emphatic-emotional readers, as well as intellectual readers.

³¹ When summarizing events (second task), only one third of students from this group achieved all points, while when choosing the appropriate statement (third task), only two students achieved four points out of seven and all others achieved less than half of the available points.

³² The main reason being that it effectively removes reception noise caused by exceptional archaisms and the inverted and metaphoric style of Prešeren's poems.

³³ Dović (2004: 73) quotes Schmidt's conclusion, that in the late 18th century, the German reading public developed into utility type readers (reading for utilitarian reasons), empathetic-emotional readers (reading for enjoyment and in place of experiences) and intellectual readers (reading as self-actualization). This classification made by Schmidt is still useful.

Zoran Božič

zoran.bozic@guest.arnes.si

Fakulteta za humanistiko

Univerza v Novi Gorici

Vipavska cesta 13

5000 Nova Gorica

SLOVENIJA

References

- Bernays, E. 1928. *Propaganda*. New York: Horace Liveright.
- Bezjak, J. 1907. *Didaktika, Part II: Posebno ukoslovje slovenskega učnega jezika v ljudski šoli*. Ljubljana: Slovenska šolska matica.
- Božič, Z. 2010. *Slovenska literatura v šoli in Prešeren*. Ljubljana: Tangram.
- Chaucer, G. 1988. *The Canterbury Tales*. London: Michael O'Hara Books.
- Chaucer, G. 1990. *The Canterbury Tales* [simplified]. London: Longman.
- Chaucer, G. 1996. *The Canterbury Tales*. London: Penguin Books.
- Dante Alighieri 1971. *Divina commedia*. Milano: Bietti.
- Dante Alighieri 1998. *La divina commedia*. Milano: Gruppo Mondadori.
- Dović, M. 2004. *Sistemske in empirične obravnave literature*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC.
- Genette, G. 1982. *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré*. Paris: Seuil.
- Grosman, M. 1974. *Odnos med bralcem in besedno umetnino v luči angleške literarne kritike (1921–1961): an excerpt from a doctoral thesis*. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.
- Grosman, M. 2004. *Zagovor branja: bralec in književnost v 21. stoletju*. Ljubljana: Založba Sophia.
- Grosman, M. 2006. *Razsežnosti branja*. Ljubljana: Založba Karantanija.
- Hafner, K., Ločniškar, F. 1943. *Četrto slovensko berilo*. Ljubljana: Pokrajinska šolska založba.
- Hladnik, M. 1995. Količinske in empirične raziskave literature. – *Slavistična revija*, 43/3, 319–337.
- Juvan, M. 1990. *Imaginarij Kersta v slovenski literaturi: medbesedilnost recepcije*. Ljubljana: Revija Literatura.
- Kraker Vogel, B. 2000/2001. Obravnavanje literarne klasike v sodobni šoli – na primeru Prešerna. – *Jezik in slovstvo*, 46/4, 125–136.
- Kraker Vogel, B. 2004. *Poglavja iz didaktike književnosti*. Ljubljana: DZS.
- Lamb, Ch., Lamb, M. 1971. *Tales from Shakespeare*. London: Longman.
- Levstik, F. 1956. Nekoliko težjih reči v Prešernu. – A. Slodnjak, ed., *Zbrano delo VI*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 200–234.
- Ozvald, K. 1905. *Naši kulturni delavci v zrcalu Prešernovih poezij*. Gorica: Narodna tiskarna.
- Pečjak, S. 1993. *Kako do boljšega branja: tehnike in metode za izboljšanje bralne učinkovitosti*. Ljubljana: Zavod RS za šolstvo in šport.

- Pečjak, S. 1999. *Osnove psihologije branja*. Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete.
- Petaros, R., Šah, M. 1980. *Od prvih zapiskov do romantike* (Slovene Reader for Second Year of Higher Secondary Schools). Trst: Deželni šolski urad za Furlanijo-Julijsko krajino.
- Prešeren, F. 1964. *Poezije in pisma*. Ed. A. Slodnjak. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.
- Prešeren, F. 1965. *Zbrano delo I*. Ed. J. Kos. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije.
- Prešeren, F. 1999. *Poems/Pesmi*. Ed. F. Pibernik and F. Drolc. Transl. T. M. S. Priestly and H. R. Cooper. Kranj: Mestna občina Kranj and Klagenfurt – Ljubljana – Vienna: Hermagoras-Verlag.
- Prešeren, F. 2000. *Pesmi in pisma*. Ed. B. Paternu. Ljubljana: DZS.
- Richards, I. A. 1929. *Practical criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company Limited.
- Schmidt, S. J. 1980. *Grundriss der empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*. Braunschweig – Wiesbaden: Vieweg.